

Wild horses' fans fear roundups will weaken herds

By BRETT FRENCH
Of The Gazette Staff
August 20, 2005

Wild-horse advocates are concerned that the roundup of up to 10,000 wild horses and burros across the West this year will lower their populations drastically and threaten the animals' genetic diversity.

The roundup includes the removal this month of 1,000 mustangs from two herds in Wyoming's Red Desert.

"You cannot preserve this gene pool with such reductions," said Karen Sussman, president of the Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros. "Each herd has a significant historical value."

The Bureau of Land Management, the agency responsible for managing the herds, will hold 57 gathers this year in nine Western states. In the past three years, the agency has removed 10,000 horses each year from federal lands.

The roundups do not include Montana's only wild-horse herd in the Pryor Mountains, where the population is being limited through the use of birth-control drugs. But if the herd remains at 160 horses, a gather will be considered next fall, according to Linda Coates-Markle, wild-horse manager for the BLM in Billings.

Wyoming has 16 wild-horse herds. Only two, the Salt Wells Creek and Adobe Town, are scheduled for reduction this month. According to Alan Shepherd, Wyoming wild-horse specialist for the BLM, the wild-horse population at Adobe Town is around 1,200 animals with the Salt Wells population near 625. Target populations for the herds are 610 to 800 for Adobe Town and 250 to 400 for Salt Wells.

"The populations are so large it's taken a couple of gathers to get down to our target numbers," Shepherd said. "We don't want to do any further damage to the habitat they're in. The area is critical elk, deer and antelope winter range."

Sussman said the notion that wild horses and burros damage rangelands is incorrect. She said cattle grazing more often leads to environmental damage on public lands.

"For the most part, wild animals move more across the range," she said. "If they're going to remove 10 percent of the horses, it has to be commensurate - they should remove 10 percent of the cattle and 10 percent of the wildlife."

Sussman also complained that the BLM keeps revising its numbers for maximum herd size in the West. BLM estimates there are 32,000 wild horses and burros roaming federal lands. But the agency has calculated that the rangeland can support only 28,000 animals.

"Every 10 years the management levels change," Sussman said. "In 1960, the management levels were at 60,000 horses and burros. In the mid-1980s, they pushed to get it down to 36,000. Now, 15 to 20 years later, it's 23,000 to 29,000. What that will do is put these horses in jeopardy."

To help place some of the wild horses that are rounded up, Sussman said, her group is working to encourage American Indian tribes to adopt the animals. The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in South Dakota is managing a herd now.

"Our goal is to see that they are protected on native land," Sussman said.

The roundups are conducted by a BLM-hired contractor who uses a helicopter to herd horses toward portable panels set up to catch the animals.

Of all the roundups this year, Nevada's Buck and Bald Complex and Fish Creek Complex will see the largest reductions, 805 and 896 respectively. Nationwide, Wyoming's Adobe Town herd comes in third with a planned reduction of 675 horses, and the Salt Wells Creek herd will be reduced by 325.

Next year, Wyoming plans reductions to six more of its horse herds, the BLM's Shepherd said.

The estimated cost of removing and holding the animals this year will be \$39.5 million, \$20.1 million of which will go toward keeping the animals before an estimated 6,000 are adopted.

BLM expects to sell "without limitation" 8,400 wild horses and burros this year that are more than 10 years old or have been passed over for adoption at least three times. The Burns amendment, named after Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., which passed last December, makes it easier for the agency to send older and unwanted horses to slaughter. The national animal rights group Friends of Animals is pursuing legislation to end all wild-horse roundups.

Wild-horse advocate Elizabeth Stevens of South Pasadena, Calif., said the BLM has failed for decades to protect and preserve America's wild-horse herds.

"It seems like a real conflict of interest between the people BLM serves - ranchers and the oil and gas industry - and the wild horses," she said. "And unfortunately, the horses don't get to speak out."

Brett French can be reached at French@billingsgazette.com or at 657-1387.

BLM wants more space for horses

The Bureau of Land Management is seeking an expansion of the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, located about 60 miles south of Billings.

"The issues are still on the table, but there's been no decision at this time," said Linda Coates-Markle, BLM's wild-horse manager in Montana.

The BLM has said the Pryor range's 40,000 acres of mountainous uplands and desertlike lowlands cannot continue to support the 140 to 150 horses needed to preserve genetic health. Without additional acreage, the agency has proposed maintaining a herd of about 95 horses, plus or minus 10 percent, not counting foals. The herd stands at 167 horses with 28 foals.

The BLM has asked the Forest Service and the National Park Service, which own lands adjacent to the

Pryors, to consider allowing wild horses onto their property. Although there is no fence separating the lands now, an agreement would formalize what is already taking place.

"From an ecological standpoint, the BLM feels strongly that what the horses need is more summer range," Coates-Markle said. "If a decision is made that they can no longer have access to Forest Service lands, we will have to cut the herd."

Last summer, the Pryor herd lost 27 of 28 foals. Over the winter hunting season, Fish, Wildlife and Parks reported that three adult mountain lions were killed in the Pryors. This summer, the herd bounced back with a 75 percent foaling rate.

"They seem to be able to handle these catastrophic events and survive," Coates-Markle said.

Details

For information on adopting a wild horse, log on to the Department of Interior Web site at www.doi.gov/horse/